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**Robert Frost:  
A Moment in Time**

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Honors Thesis  
Professor Dabney, Adviser



Having grown up in New Hampshire, I share with Frost a familiarity with and affection for the life and nature of New England. Frost's widely known poems "Birches," "Stopping By Woods On a Snowy Evening," and "The Road Not Taken" are among the few poems I knew before undertaking this project. While exploring the poetry of Seamus Heaney, I discovered that, to Heaney, Frost was "the first poet who ever spoke to me."<sup>1</sup> Frost's influence on Heaney impressed me, since I did not know that Frost had been influential outside of America. My idea about him as a poet was that his work was popular in America, easy to read and enjoy.

I have since read his work with increasing pleasure and a new awareness of his skill, his intelligence, and his importance as a poet. My thesis is based on something that I have observed in reading his work: Frost almost always builds his poems on a moment in time, a moment that has importance in either a narrative sequence or in some other order—conceptual, temporal, spatial. Save for a brief comment by Hayden Carruth, this is not an idea that I have found critically commented on. Carruth says that Frost is "a poet who remains open to experience—and not only open, but submissive, and not only to experience, but to the actual newness of experience here and now."<sup>2</sup> What I have called a "moment," Carruth has labelled the "here and now." The relation between the moment and its context is sometimes implied carefully, explicitly; other times it is merely suggested as an irony. Frost usually retreats from the suggested context to the moment, which seems to be the real subject of his poem.

My intention is to examine Frost's choice of a "moment" and how it relates to its context, its narrative sequence, the ideas it suggests. Does Frost retreat to the moment as a means of escape from the context? Does he see the moment more

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<sup>1</sup> Buttel, Robert, Seamus Heaney, (PA: Bucknell University Press, 1975) p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> Hayden Carruth, Effluences from the Sacred Caves, (MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1983) p. 62.





clearly than the context? Does he use the relation between the moment and its context to comment on how moments constitute reality? Does he use the moment to undercut the importance of the context, or to insist on the importance of the thing he has to say? Does Frost aim simply to share a moment in time or to use the moment as a precursor to addressing an issue of importance? Does he attempt to resolve the issues he addresses? I will investigate these questions through the close reading and analysis of each poem.

“Out, Out—” is a poem from Frost’s volume *Mountain Interval*, published in 1916. Frost brings the moment to life, toward a pinnacle from which he presents the reader with an issue; here, the issue is how one can go on with one’s life after witnessing the death of another. The action in the poem takes no more than thirty minutes near the end of a work day, during which time Frost invites the reader to glimpse a common enterprise in Vermont, cutting wood in preparation for winter.

Frost begins the poem with the snarling and rattling of the buzz saw.<sup>3</sup> The past tense forms of *snarl* and *rattle* draw attention to themselves as onomatopoeic words in the line; Frost wants the reader not only to see the saw, but to hear it too. Later on he will explain what the snarl and rattle mean, but for now he just gives us the noises. The endstopped line calls the reader first to focus on the saw, pause, and then turn to the chunks of wood falling one after another from the saw to the ground. “The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard/And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,/Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.” The second line is a complete thought calling the reader now to see the wood rather than the saw, so that his eye moves from the rattling saw to the falling wood—

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3 The kind of saw Frost would have known in 1916 was a “buzz saw,” a saw with a circular blade supported by a stationary table connected to some stationary source of power (probably a steam thresher).



freshly cut “sweet-scented stuff” on the ground. Frost brings this moment to the reader, an insignificant detail in comparison to the way Frost ends the poem; nevertheless, Frost begins the poem with a moment that leads the reader on through the poem. In line seven Frost again sounds the snarl and rattle of the saw. “And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,/As it ran light, or had to bear a load./And nothing happened: day was all but done.” Frost’s repetition in line seven reminds us that the two noises the saw makes are specifically related to the rhythm of the work it does—when it bites into the log and when it runs free. Frost sets the scene with moments like this one. Just as he says in line nine, “nothing happened,” Frost evokes the day as a series of repetitions of this noise and work.

Frost then changes perspective by announcing the time of day to the reader, as the sister of the boy working the saw yells out “to tell them ‘Supper.’” At this point, too, Frost defines a moment.

...At the word, the saw, 14  
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,  
Leaped out at the boy’s hand, or seemed to leap— 16  
He must have given the hand.

Frost illuminates the time it took for the boy to give his hand, no more than a fraction of a second. Using enjambment<sup>4</sup> at the end of line fourteen, Frost quickens the pace by forcing the reader to jump to the next line to see the action of the saw. In line fifteen, he suggests that the saw can act and move, but quickly modifies this leaping out to a mere appearance. Frost knows (as the modern reader may not) that the saw blade on a buzz saw is stationary apart from its rotary motion. The boy “must have given his hand.” How *could* that have happened? Without attempting to provide comfort of any sort, Frost presents the moment.

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4 An enjambed line breaks a line of verse before the end of a complete unit of logic.



...Then the boy saw all—  
Since he was old enough to know, big boy  
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—  
He saw all spoiled.

Frost is abstract here; what did the boy see? I imagine he saw the blood spurting from where the saw had separated the hand from the arm, but Frost does not say just what the reader expects. Frost says only that the boy "saw all spoiled." Frost is keen to present a moment that overwhelms the circumstances of our daily lives, a moment that gives way to some new and awful issue. "'Don't let him cut my hand off—/The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!'/So. But the hand was gone already." Frost creates another moment with a single word—so. The boy has just screamed out in fear to his sister, but it has already happened—he has lost his hand. The word "so" marks the loss of his hand; no more explanation is needed. This moment of loss leads to the moment of climax, the moment in which the boy dies of shock.

And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.  
No one believed. They listened at his heart.  
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.  
No more to build on there.

Frost describes the dying with only three sequential words. "Little—less—nothing!" Following the boy's death, there are only two lines left. "...And they, since they/Were not the ones dead, turned to their affairs." Frost ends the poem with nothing more than the others' turning from the dead boy "to their affairs." He raises the issue of human reaction to death without providing a solution. In "Out, Out—" Frost creates a series of moments that leads up to the boy's death, the moment in which he presents to the reader human difficulty with death. The snarl and rattle, the rhythm of work, and the sudden accident are the foreground, the moment. "All spoiled" is a kind of conclusion, as is "no more to build on there and the hollow "they, since they/Were not the one dead turned to their affairs." Frost creates a



balance between the moment and explanation—the moment of action, work, noise of activity and the conclusion that death is arbitrary, pointless. Frost's conclusion is the epitome of the disillusioned Romanticism that seems to have flourished in America in the nineteenth century. He is marked by an unwillingness to find meaning in circumstances and to recognize any ultimate purpose in them.

In "Home Burial" Frost again confronts the issue of death. In "Out, Out—" we see someone die; in "Home Burial" we see survivors, a husband and wife in conflict because they have reacted differently to the death of their child. "Home Burial" is built on an extended dialogue, a dialogue that refers to and enlivens past moments. Neither the cause nor precise moment of the child's death is recalled in the poem; it is the wife's keen recollection of the moment she watched her husband bury their child that is at the root of this poem. In her grief, she cannot leave the moment behind, despite the fact that her husband goes on with his life.

The setting of "Home Burial" stands for the issue at stake: Frost immediately lets the reader know that the man is at the bottom of the stairs looking up at the woman who is near the top of the stairs. In short stories, the setting helps the reader to see the plot. Here, the setting is more important to the reader's understanding than is the plot. The woman, Amy, is physically higher than the man and, from her position, is able to see something that he cannot. In line seven he is not simply asking what it is she sees, but more directly, what it is she sees "from up there always." Their relative positions on the staircase symbolize their inability to communicate. The landscape and details of the home are not important in understanding this relationship; Frost has taken an important component of the short story—setting—and shown the reader only as much as he needs to see: a staircase with a window at the top looking out onto four stone slabs in a graveyard. The positions of each Amy and her husband lead into the dialogue between them.





Amy begins to walk down the stairs and, although the reader has not seen anything, she turns to look "back over her shoulder at some fear."

She took a doubtful step and then undid it  
To raise herself and look again. He spoke  
Advancing toward her: 'What is it you see  
From up there always?—for I want to know.'

The reader knows immediately that it is something that holds Amy's gaze, something she cannot name. Frost enables the reader to share the perspective of the husband, who is never named in the poem, because neither, at this point, can see what Amy sees. Amy's husband wants to know what she sees and to share it with her, thereby helping to relieve her of a burden.

She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,  
And her face changed from terrified to dull.  
He said to gain time: 'What is it you see?'  
Mounting until she cowered under him.

Frost shows Amy doing two things: turning and sinking. Frost then makes the focus more narrow, as he moves from her bodily position to her facial expression, one that "changed from terrified to dull." Amy's position and expression help the reader to see her and to understand her inability to escape the pain of the situation. As her husband draws closer, Amy turns away from the terror she sees. Her face becomes dull; she cannot turn to her husband with such fear. She cannot turn and look at him; she can only cower "under him" while he mounts the stairs to meet her. Frost's choice to set "Home Burial" on a staircase where, on different steps, one is always above the other, symbolizes the fact that there is no common ground between them. They cannot stand face to face—Amy cannot speak of the fear she sees.

'I will find out now—you must tell me, dear.'  
She, in her place, refused him any help,  
With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.  
She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,



Blind creature; and awhile he didn't see.

Her husband is obstinate; in an effort to see what Amy has seen, he comes closer to her on a higher step. "Home Burial" is full of moments such as this—the moment in which her husband tries to stand alongside Amy to try and see what she sees. It is a quiet and strained moment wherein Amy refuses to respond to her husband. She stiffens her neck in silence, as if he were some animal encroaching upon her. "Blind creature," she calls him in her thoughts, sure that there is no chance of him seeing what she sees.

But at last he murmured, 'Oh,' and again, 'Oh.'  
'What is it—what?' she said.

'Just that I see.'  
'You don't,' she challenged. 'Tell me what it is.'

This thing that she sees, "some fear," is still unnamed. "Oh," he says, and she questions, "What is it—what?" Neither does he name what he has seen; he answers her with no more than "Just that I see." He is not a blind creature. His understanding sparks communication—Amy wants to know if he truly does see.

After Frost's referring to, but refusing to name the scene in the window beyond "some fear," Amy's husband knows that which terrorizes Amy and cannot be still any longer.

'The wonder is I didn't see at once...  
The little graveyard where my people are!  
So small the window frames the whole of it...  
There are three stones of slate and one of marble,  
Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight  
On the sidehill. We haven't to mind *those*.  
But I understand: it is not the stones,  
But the child's mound—'

As soon as he names the grave, Amy cries out to stop him, "Don't, don't, don't, don't." The mute letter<sup>5</sup> *t* at the end of a line is effective; Frost heightens the

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5 A mute letter is one that causes a pause after its pronunciation.







still on the stairs and she near the door at the foot of the stairs, symbolize that they are in different places—she is grieving and he is going on with his life. The walls Amy has put up around herself bring her husband to ask for help; he no longer knows even how to try to comfort her. Line forty-four is an endstopped line and, in this case, a complete sentence. Frost says all he needs to in this line; one can almost hear the silence, as “her fingers moved the latch for all reply.” She stands at the door while her husband continues to speak.

‘My words are nearly always an offense.  
I don’t know how to speak of anything  
So as to please you. But I might be taught,  
I should suppose...we could have some arrangement  
By which I’d bind myself to keep hands off  
Anything special you’re a-mind to name.  
Though I don’t like such things ’twixt those that love.

So there is love—he confesses his love! Because he loves her, he tries to reach her. There is no sound apart from the sound of his voice until “she moved the latch a little.”

‘Don’t—don’t go.  
Don’t carry it to someone else this time.  
Tell me about it if it’s something human.  
Let me into your grief.’

Addressing Amy in the imperative, he becomes more adamant. His emotion surfaces and changes from quiet pleas to anger. “I’ll come down to you./God, what a woman! And it’s come to this,/A man can’t speak of his own child that’s dead.” His anger reaches Amy and brings her to speak.

If you had any feelings, you that dug	72
With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave;	
I saw you from that very window there,	74
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,	
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly	76
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.	





Amy does not simply say from the window, but from “*that* very window *there*.” (emphasis added). She relates the moment of burial to the window on the staircase. The scene in her mind that comes with her bitter grief is that of her husband at work with his shovel. Frost’s alliteration using the *l* sound makes line seventy-six bold, so that the reader sees this leaping gravel just as clearly as Amy remembers it. John Kemp says this about the passage:

...the oppressive iambic rhythm, accentuated by commas and repeated words, seems to build up and up like the mound of dirt, until the feminine ending of ‘lightly’ at the end of line 76 constitutes a final superfluity providing just enough excess weight to precipitate the miniature landslide of gravel back down the mound.<sup>6</sup>

Alliteration, alongside the mutes *p* and *t*, gives line seventy-six authority. Amy cannot escape that moment—she can neither go on with her life nor forgive her husband. Why? Frost makes the reader think of the moment and the continuum it fits into. Amy focuses relentlessly on the moment. Her husband, because he has left the moment behind and continued to live, is a continual offense to her.

Amy recalls not only the scene of dirt leaping in the air, but her husband’s returning to the house and the very words he said once inside.

I can repeat the very words you were saying:  
‘Three foggy mornings and one rainy day  
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.’  
Think of it, talk like that at such a time...

“Three foggy mornings and one rainy day” rotting a birch fence is a generality, something that could have been true whether or not the child had died. How dare her husband refer to something that has nothing to do with the moment at hand?

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<sup>6</sup> John C. Kemp, Robert Frost and New England: The Poet as Regionalist, (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979) p.155.



What does the way humidity can rot a birch fence have to do with the death of their child? To Amy, it is a kind of blasphemy to go beyond the moment.

"Home Burial" is nearly at its end, and Amy still clutches the door with thought to leave—to leave her home, to leave her husband. "Where did you mean to go? First tell me that./I'll follow and bring you back by force. I *will!*—" Frost ends "Home Burial" here, with a clash of wills between husband and wife. He moves fluidly from the initial moment on the stairs to a recollection of the day Amy's husband buried their child back to Amy, hardened in her unwillingness to leave the moment of loss behind. Amy does not *want* to heal. It is no longer an issue of communication. Frost creates a scene in which husband and wife can no longer live alongside one another. She wishes to remain in a past moment—he goes on.

"The Wood-Pile" is a poem from Frost's 1914 volume *North of Boston* in which Frost describes the moment of discovering an old pile of wood split and stacked in the middle of a frozen swamp in winter. "The Wood-Pile" is much less extreme than "Out Out—" or "Home Burial"—it is not about death. In the first three lines Frost uses endstopped lines to establish the moment in which the protagonist decides not to turn back, but to go on walking in the swamp, a moment that is secondary to the later central moment of the poem. "Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day,/I paused and said, 'I will turn back from here./No, I will go on farther—and we shall see.'" Frost shows very little of the swamp here; he tells only that the day is "gray." This beginning moment is brief, lasting only long enough for the protagonist to decide to go on. The last phrase in the third line, "—and we shall see" leads the reader to see just what it is the protagonist will find.

Frost takes the reader through this swamp paying close attention to the details of the day and surroundings. He describes the snow, a crusty hard-packed layer of



snow through which “now and then/One foot went through.” The swamp was not open the way one might imagine it to be, but was instead full of trees.

The view was all in lines  
Straight up and down of all slim trees  
Too much alike to mark or name a place by  
So as to say for certain I was here  
Or somewhere else...

Are the lines alike or are the trees alike in the lines? Probably both; this scene will not let us pinpoint exactly where we are. Can a significant moment happen in an indefinite place? “The Wood-Pile” is evidence that it can; here, the moment will take precedence over the place. Frost then narrows the scope through which the reader sees the scene; he focuses not on the trees, but on a small bird. In the swamp Frost moves from the half frozen surface of the swamp to the trees and then to this small bird flitting from tree to tree in fear.

...He was careful  
to put a tree between us when he lighted,  
And say no word to tell me who he was...  
He thought that I was after him for a feather—  
The white one in his tail...

The bird is something definite; he will not say who he is but he has that white tail feather, and he alights on a definite object with a definite meaning, the wood-pile of the poem’s title. “It was a cord of maple, cut and split/And piled—and measured, four by four by eight./And not another like it could I see.” Frost writes with a sense of wonder at this cord of wood being left in the swamp to rot. He notices the different kinds of work it took and that its dimensions are the standard commercial measure of firewood. He goes on to observe that it has been there a long time—too long. “No runner tracks in this year’s snow looped near it./And it was older sure than this year’s cutting,/Or even last year’s or the year’s before.” The protagonist happens upon it and immediately wonders about its origin; where did this pile come from and why has something so useful been left out here in the



swamp? "The wood was gray and the bark warping off it/And the pile somewhat sunken." The protagonist goes close to inspect its age and the damage done by time and the seasons in the swamp. In this moment of discovery, Frost ponders the irony of leaving to rot something so carefully prepared and requiring so much work. According to a New England saying: "Wood warms you five times: cutting, splitting, stacking, carrying, burning," so no one just walks away from a woodpile.

In the midst of "hard snow," "tall slim trees/Too much alike to mark or name a place by," and the near-noiseless flight of a bird from tree to tree, Frost ponders those past moments of noise and action that must have happened when all that work was done. This place in the woods is the setting in which the wood was initially piled and where the protagonist is able to ponder in the poem in a calm moment. "...there far from a useful fireplace/To warm the frozen swamp as best it could/With the slow smokeless burning of decay." Frost's use of the word "burning" plays on the fact that the wood is being destroyed, just as if it were being burned for the warmth of someone's home. The phrase "slow smokeless burning" slows the pace of the line with accents on "slow" and on the first syllables in "smokeless" and "burning" so that the reader, too, experiences the inactivity of this moment. The context here is a conjecture about wasted work, which is rich in implication. The moment is one of indefiniteness suddenly become definite through an object, the wood-pile. The moment of realizing where we are because we have discovered something that does not make sense is more important than the contemplation of wasted work.

"The Oven Bird" is a poem from Frost's 1916 volume *Mountain Interval*. It is a poem wherein Frost does not show the reader a moment, but instead tells the reader about a moment: the moment of "a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,/Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again." He writes about the





implications of hearing a bird's song during the summer; the bird "says that leaves are old and that for flowers/Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten." The issue here is "what to make of a diminished thing," how to go on when what is left is markedly less than what one used to have, or, at best, how to understand.

Frost brings the reader into the poem with "...a singer everyone has heard." He chose, in this poem, not to invite the reader into this particular moment, but instead to set the moment apart by telling about it. The fact that the ovenbird still sings in July signifies the season. The first three lines are endstopped lines geared toward introducing this "mid-summer and mid-wood" bird to the reader. "There is a singer everyone has heard,/Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,/Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again." Frost's use of the mute letter *d* causes the reader to pause at the end of the first two lines, as if at the end of a sentence. Pausing after the word "heard" tells the reader that this "singer" is just that, a bird not perhaps to be seen, but to be heard. Both the first and last words of the second line end with the mute letter *d*, asking the reader to pause on the words "loud" and "bird." Frost continues this use of the mute *d* in the word "sound" of line three. The first three lines set the reader up for the rest of the poem. "The Oven Bird" is built on what the bird says. Frost's opening prepares the reader to hear what the speaker of the poem describes the bird to be saying. The issue Frost confronts the reader with appears through the bird's song.

Just what *does* the bird sing? As noted above, he sings about aging leaves and fading flowers dull to those of spring. "He says the early petal-fall is past,/When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers/On sunny days a moment overcast..." With "the early petal-fall" when "pear and cherry bloom went down in showers," Frost appeals to the reader's experience, rather than enabling him to hear the bird's song; the song is the vehicle through which he addresses the issue at hand. The song of the bird also stands for the coming season, "that other fall we name the fall."



Frost's repeating the word "fall" recalls his earlier description of the pear and cherry "early petal-fall." He seems to imply a connection between the two, that there is some intent or purpose in the fall. "The bird would cease and be as other birds/But that he knows in singing not to sing." The bird would not sing (mid-summer does not ask for song) except that his song is not a celebration, but a question. Frost's pondering the seasons is relevant; the bird seems to know by innate sense when to sing and when not to sing.

Each of these things that Frost presents through the song of the bird culminates in the final two lines of the poem. "The question that he frames in all but words/Is what to make of a diminished thing.

The word *frames* (as compared with *asks* or *poses*) suggests "crafting"—on the physical level, the work of the joiner or cabinetmaker; on the verbal level, the work of the rhetorician or poet. And *make*, as Frost, who studied Greek in college, would have known, translates the Greek verb from which the word *poem* and its cognates are derived in modern English.<sup>7</sup>

It comes as no surprise that Frost closes "The Oven Bird" with just such a question, illustrating that it was Frost's aim simply to present an issue in a poem, not to resolve it. "The Oven Bird" deals with a moment in mid-summer, but Frost uses the bird to tell about other moments in the year. Frost raises the issue of how human beings know what they know. How do we know that a moment gone by really existed? "The Oven Bird" signifies mid-summer, when spring has passed and fall is coming. What about Frost's call to the reader to address "a diminished thing?" The bird represents the moment, and because it is summer, we think of the moments that have passed. Here, the thing diminished is the season, spring;

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<sup>7</sup> Marie Borroff, "Sound Symbolism as Drama in the Poetry of Robert Frost," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, volume 107, number 1, (NY: The Modern Language Association of America, January 1992) p. 137.



because fall is on its way, the year, too, is nearly gone. Frost is constantly aware of the continuum of time, fragmented into a series of moments.

"The Road Not Taken", also from Frost's 1916 volume *Mountain Interval*, is like "The Oven Bird" in that it examines a series of moments. Frost begins and ends this poem with the same moment—standing at a fork in the path and choosing which way to go. "The Road Not Taken" is technically unique among the poems I have explored thus far in that it is written in stanzas, four five-line stanzas. "The Road Not Taken" resembles "The Oven Bird" in that Frost tells about this moment of being in the woods; beyond "yellow" he does not describe the wood, which remains abstract. "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,/And sorry I could not travel both/And be one traveler, long I stood..." The rhythm is regular, as if the reader too, were walking in the wood.

Frost begins the second stanza as the speaker turns from the path he sees bending "in the undergrowth" to another "...just as fair,/And having perhaps the better claim..." The path the speaker chooses to follow was "grassy and wanted wear." Frost shows us more, though still very little, of the path the speaker will take. His focus is not on the wood, nor even on the speaker, but instead on the decision the speaker has made. How can the reader see such a thing? He cannot. Frost, while providing the bare frame of the setting, addresses the decision being made rather than focusing on the details of the path or trees in the wood. In the third stanza Frost lays each path side by side for the reader to see "in leaves no step had trodden black." Frost still gives no detail except that each path is covered with leaves and untrodden up to this time in the day. As he did in the first stanza, in the third Frost shows only a small part of the setting and then turns to the speaker. "Oh, I kept the first for another day!/Yet knowing how way leads on to way,/I doubted if I should ever come back." The reader does not see physical details about the speaker; instead,



Frost enables the reader to hear the speaker's thought process. Line fourteen, in which the speaker realizes "how way leads on to way," captures Frost's illumination of the moment. It is that split second in which the speaker chooses to take one path instead of the other that marks the passing from one moment to the next. His choosing to follow the second path leaves the experience of a moment on the first path undiscovered. Just as in "The Oven Bird", Frost's awareness of time as a continuum built of single moments happening one after another is apparent.

The fourth stanza focuses on the thought of the speaker, as he contemplates "telling this with a sigh/Somewhere ages and ages hence..." This too, because the speaker thinks of recalling and sharing this specific moment, is evidence of Frost's theory that time is built on a series of moments. The speaker has confidence in recalling not a week or a day, but the very moment in a day when he chose to take one path instead of another. "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by,/And that has made all the difference." The rhyme of "I" and "by" reminds the reader of the word "sigh" in the first line of the final stanza; this is the moment he will remember "with a sigh." In the words of Kemp, "it is a wistful meditation on the consequences of choice for a creature whose vision runs beyond the realm of possibility."<sup>8</sup> Like the song of the bird in "The Oven Bird", this is the moment from which past and future moments are put into perspective. After all, "The Road Not Taken" is not a poem about nature, but rather a metaphor for Frost's thought that a decision made in a moment will shape each moment thereafter in one's life.

The four poems I will discuss now are from Frost's 1923 volume *New Hampshire*. *New Hampshire* has often been said to be the volume of Frost's best,

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Frost and New England: The Poet as Regionalist, p. 220.





most admired, and most enjoyed work. Here, I have not set out to say which of Frost's work is his best; I have chosen the following four poems for the moments Frost has created in them.

"Dust of Snow" is the shortest of the poems I've chosen and was part of a section of short lyric poems in *New Hampshire* that Frost, at one time, titled "Grace Notes."<sup>9</sup> It has two four-line stanzas and a regular rhyme scheme. Save for the last line in the poem that has six words, Frost wrote each line with four words. Furthermore, "Dust of Snow" is a poem built on one sentence. Like poems such as "Home Burial" and "The Oven Bird", "Dust of Snow" is built on a series of moments; they happen quickly and are brief, amounting to no more than a few seconds. It is written in the past tense so that the reader is hearing about a moment from the speaker's past experience. The action of the poem takes place not as the protagonist speaks, but sometime before.

The way a crow	1
Shook down on me	
The dust of snow	3
From a hemlock tree...	

The entire first stanza is the subject of the sentence, the poem—snow falling from a hemlock tree onto the speaker. With enjambment in line one, Frost draws the reader from line to line—from the crow upon a branch in the tree to the snow falling from the branch onto the speaker below. Putting this poem into slow motion enables the reader to see each moment: a crow perched in a tree; its perch causing snow to fall from the tree; the landing of snow on top of the speaker. The moment "Dust of Snow" portrays is built on each of these moments; again, time is a continuum made up of moments. Frost's use of enjambment in line one quickens the first stanza, just as the action of snow falling is quick to the human eye. Frost's

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<sup>9</sup> William H. Pritchard, *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered*, (USA: Oxford University Press, 1984,) p. 162.



turn from the first to the second stanza moves from the subject to the verb in the sentence. What happened in the first stanza

Has given my heart  
A change of mood  
And saved some part  
Of a day I had rued.

Frost's rhyme moves the reader along. "Dust of Snow" supports Frost's recognition that there are consequences of the moments that we experience each day. Unlike "The Road Not Taken", the consequence of this moment is not a result of a human decision. Nevertheless, there is a consequence to the moment—this time, a "change of mood," a gift of nature. Behind the consequence there are implications about something seen which was important in a way that cannot be explained. The image is not really described—"The way a crow/Shook down on me." What way? He cannot describe just *how* it happened, just how the snow fell. He does say that it did something to his heart, gave his heart "a change of mood." The moment of snow falling is intertwined with the consequence, its giving the speaker a lift. Here neither the moment, the falling of snow, nor the consequence is of greater importance. Frost balances the two beautifully.

"Evening in a Sugar Orchard" is a seventeen-line descriptive poem with a single line of dialogue. The speaker stands outside a sugarhouse, and the one line of dialogue occurs when he asks the fireman to "give the fire another stoke,/And send more sparks up chimney with the smoke." "Evening in a Sugar Orchard" centers on the speaker's fascination watching the sparks from the fire in a sugarhouse come out of the chimney to glow among stars in the night sky. Though the poem does not show each of these moments, the moment of seeing sparks in the sky is a result of the sugar making process: a fire to boil maple sap into maple syrup. "Evening in a Sugar Orchard" assumes this entire process, but focuses on the moment when the



protagonist enjoys watching the sparks leave the chimney and enter the night sky in front of the stars. This moment results in the speaker's further understanding that "the sparks made no attempt to be the moon"; indicating an innate difference between two things of nature so that, side by side, each defines the other.

"Evening in a Sugar Orchard" is a seventeen-line poem in iambic pentameter that begins and ends with an a-b-b-a rhyme scheme. It is a poem without defined stanzas, in which Frost chose to use the endstopped line. The first four lines establish the setting of the poem.

From where I lingered in a lull in March  
Outside a sugarhouse one night for choice,  
I called the fireman with a careful voice  
And bade him leave the pan and stoke the arch...

Lingering "in a lull" describes the moment this poem seeks to illuminate. The rhyme quickens the rhythm of the poem and gives it cohesion as "arch" reminds the reader of "March." The speaker prompts the fireman<sup>10</sup> to "leave the pan and stoke the arch," the action that leads to the speaker's seeing the sparks in the sky. In "Evening in a Sugar Orchard", Frost focuses both on the thoughts of the speaker and on the setting.

I thought a few might tangle, as they did,  
Among bare maple boughs, and in the rare  
Hill atmosphere not cease to glow,  
And so be added to the moon up there.

The speaker is all the while remembering the vision of the sparks among bare limbs; Frost reveals for the reader a private, contemplative time. The moment could well have been shared by two people, but Frost chose to give us the thoughts of only one. He then moves from the thoughts of the speaker to the outdoors. By breaking line eight after the word "rare," Frost pushes the reader to go on and read the whole

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10 The fireman is the one who is responsible for stoking the fire in a sugarhouse.



thought. He moves from the speaker to the scene itself—the bare maple boughs and now sparks glowing alongside the moon. “The moon, though slight, was moon enough to show/On every tree a bucket with a lid,/And on black ground a bear-skin rug of snow.” Frost’s noting covered buckets “on every tree” returns the reader to the first step in the process, even though the moments of collecting the sap have gone by. Those moments aside, we have come to the point of seeing sparks from the fire in the sugar house join the sky. What then does the reader find?

The sparks made no attempt to be the moon.  
They were content to figure in the trees  
As Leo, Orion, and the Pleiades.  
And that was what the boughs were full of soon.

The final line captures the wondrous, momentary setting of the poem—a starlit sky made more brilliant by golden orange sparks floating upward, this “Evening in a Sugar Orchard.” Of course the sparks would not “be the moon,” but Frost does have them resemble stars. Quick patterns of sparks in the sky create instant configurations of constellations. Frost contrasts the sparks with the stars—enormous stars that shine steadily with miniscule sparks that flicker on and off. Frost writes of the boughs that are full of these—miniature constellations flashing and then immediately disappearing into the night sky. What was Frost’s intention with such a drastic paradox? He makes us see the quick and the temporary by reminding us, with images of constellations, of the eternal. “Evening in a Sugar Orchard” is truly a moment poem.

Also from *New Hampshire*, “For Once, Then, Something”, like “The Road Not Taken”, is a poem in which Frost focuses not on the surroundings, but on the action and, more importantly, on the conjectures of the speaker. It is a poem of fifteen unrhymed lines of regular length. Frost’s image of someone kneeling to peer into a well is a metaphor for the speaker’s search for an eternal truth.





In the first sentence of the poem, made up of the first six lines, Frost tells the reader that “having knelt at well-curbs” is something the speaker has done quite often.

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs  
Always wrong to the light, so never seeing  
Deeper down in the well than where the water  
Gives me back in a shining surface picture  
Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike,  
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.

In the first six lines, Frost does not show one moment of looking into a well; rather, he speaks about how often he has seen no more than his own reflection in the surface of water. He speaks, too, about the taunts he has earned for his gazing at no more than himself. Frost’s tone is jesting; he dresses up a simple description of the reflection of a face with phrases like “a shining surface picture” and “in the summer heaven.” Frost does not describe the well or even the greenery; instead, opening and marking the moment with the word “once,” he creates opposition between the individual as center, “godlike,” and some power outside of the individual— “truth?”

Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,  
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,  
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,  
Something more of the depths—and then I lost it.

The word *once* marks a change in the poem: the speaker moves from speaking in general about looking into a well to recalling an actual moment when he thought he saw something—“a something white, uncertain,/Something more of the depths...” This moment recalled is the rock on which “For Once, Then, Something” stands; it serves as the foreground from which Frost proceeds to present the reader with the opposition between a relative and an eternal truth. Instead of merely seeing himself glorified “in the summer heaven,” the speaker sees something more, until “water came to rebuke the too clear water.” In writing this,



Frost was probably familiar with the proverb "Truth lies at the bottom of a well." The root of this proverb is attributed to Democritus, a Greek philosopher who was born between 460-457 B.C. and is thought to have said, "We know nothing certainly, for truth lies in the deep."<sup>11</sup> Frost gives this water life, as if the water were controlling what it did and did not want the looker to see.

One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple  
Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,  
Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?  
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.

Using repetition of the mute letter *d*, Frost calls the reader to hesitate on the words "blurred" and "blotted." He focuses on the moment of losing sight of this glimpse of whiteness. It took no more than "one drop...and lo, a ripple/Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom." Frost seems to be considering the existence not of truth, but of Truth. The difference lies in the fact that truth with a lowercase t is of many things that may be experienced or conjectured, while Truth is one and stands unchanged forever. Perhaps Frost strengthens this opposition by suggesting that what stands between us and Truth is an image of ourselves. The moment of gazing into a well in "For Once, Then, Something" is the point from which Frost departs in search of something more. Frost moves away from the conjecture in the poem when he names that "something white, uncertain." "What was that whiteness?/Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something." By specifically naming that thing which he sees a pebble, Frost departs from conjecture if only for a moment. There is modesty, irony, but also a certain irreducible firmness—"for once, then, something." Hayden Carruth has criticized Frost for his naming "truth" in the poem.

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11 John Simpson, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs, (USA: Oxford University Press, 1982) p. 231.



The poet, in despair, *names* what his poem is about, "truth," thus committing the poet's cardinal sin; and at once the poem is destroyed, the labored metaphor of the well collapses. What lies at the bottom of the well is—is—is...but of course it cannot be named, that is the whole point...<sup>12</sup>

Carruth criticizes Frost for "coercing"<sup>13</sup> his poem, by which I think he means not allowing the poem to declare itself. The poem *does* declare itself, and Frost's naming "Truth" is an important part of that process. Carruth asserts that the point of the poem is that "what lies at the bottom of the well...cannot be named." Frost's point is not simply that "Truth" cannot be named, but that the search for "Truth" is ongoing. There is a heritage behind this search; Democritus' proverb is evidence of that. Carruth says that "the well metaphor is simply too pat, too sentimental,"<sup>14</sup> ignoring the fact that it is a proverb dating back to the fifth century B.C. Naming "Truth" is integral to Frost's calling the poem "For Once, Then, Something." It signifies that once, along this search for "Truth," it may have been spotted. Frost brings the search to a halt and then retreats from what he sees. Naming "Truth" does in no way "destroy" the poem—it poignantly further explains the title of the poem. After all, it is characteristic of Frost to define the moment briefly with something the reader can see and then to resume his course on the continuum of life.

"Stopping By Woods On a Snowy Evening" examines life as a journey, a journey upon which the moment in this poem is merely a rest. The poem reflects Frost's tendency to step outside of the life process and pause in order to consider something deeply—in this case, the speaker has stopped to consider the journey.

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<sup>12</sup> Effluences from the Sacred Caves, p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Effluences from the Sacred Caves, p. 58, 59, 60.

<sup>14</sup> Effluences from the Sacred Caves, p. 60.



“And miles to go before I sleep,/And miles to go before I sleep.” The poem contains sixteen lines—four stanzas of four lines each. The rhyme scheme in the first three stanzas is consistent: a-a-b-a, b-b-c-b, c-c-d-c. The rhyme scheme of the fourth stanza is d-d-d-d. Rhyme, along with endstopped lines and careful word choice, helps create this moment outside on a snowy evening. “Stopping By Woods On a Snowy Evening”, like “The Road Not Taken”, is not a poem about the nature of the place, but a metaphor for one’s journey through life.

Frost begins with the speaker’s recognition that the woods he is traveling in are not his own; he makes reference to, but does not show or address, the owner of the woods.

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village, though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

The moment is quiet; Frost makes the reader specifically aware that the speaker is alone in the woods during a snowfall. Frost’s use of iambs<sup>15</sup>, ticking along in four foot lines, makes this poem flow with the constancy of falling snow; the sound of a phrase like “fill up” is plain and accurate. There are no jarring words or changes in rhythm; Frost’s meter creates the softness of a ground blanketed with snow. The rhyme change in line three is appropriate, as it marks the place—*here*. The place is as significant—a place out of the way and apart from routine traffic—as the momentary pause from the pace of time Frost has chosen to illuminate.

In the second stanza Frost relates the fact that the speaker is with his horse, though he gives little more detail about the place. Again, the nature of the place is not significant here; the place is significant only so far as it provides the setting in which the speaker ponders the journey.

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15 An iamb is a foot of verse with one unstressed followed by one stressed syllable.





My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

While the speaker stops out somewhere far from home in a snowfall, Frost creates a scene resembling that in "The Wood-Pile", a scene in which it is difficult for the reader to get his bearings. Just as he focuses on something sure, the wood-pile, here Frost mentions that it is "the darkest evening of the year." He refers to the twenty-first of December, thus enabling the reader to identify the time of year at least. The mute *k* in "lake" and "darkest" also draws attention to the place where the speaker has stopped. He calls this moment "queer" because it is not routine to stop and separate oneself from a journey in order to reflect on it. Frost attempts to give the reader a transcendent look into the illumination of the moment.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The third stanza reiterates the rhythm and sound of the falling snow. Frost brings out the sound of the *k* used only minimally in the second stanza. Giving his bells "a shake" brings a new and different sound to the quiet of falling snow. As the horse shakes his bells as if "to ask if there is some mistake," Frost calls the reader to question the purpose in stopping. All the while, "the only other sound's the sweep/Of easy wind and downy flake." The horse shakes his harness bells among "easy wind and downy flake." The "sweep" of the wind and snow gives form to the moment, the here and now of stopping in a horse-drawn sleigh on a dark, snowy eve. During an appearance in Boston in 1962, Frost told his audience that the thing he had enjoyed the most about writing "Stopping By Woods" was "the effortless sound of that couplet about the horse and what it does when stopped by the woods: 'He gives his harness bells a shake/To ask if there is some mistake.'" William



Pritchard notes that it was probably Frost's intention to invite his readers to simply "be pleased with how he had put it (the couplet)," without debating its meaning.<sup>16</sup>

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

In the final stanza of the poem, Frost continues the rhythm of each iamb. He colors the moment "lovely, dark, and deep," but goes no further with his description of the woods; the conjunction "but" at the beginning of the second line in the stanza brings the moment to a close—a turning point in the poem. The speaker has both "promises to keep" and "miles to go." "Stopping By Woods On a Snowy Evening" brings this moment to life—a single moment after which the speaker will continue. Frost chose to focus on and enliven one moment at a time. But there is also sleep—the cessation and immobility of death. The moment stands in contrast to, and as a sort of precursor to death. Carruth said that Frost's best poems "were poems in which meaning and feeling had come together spontaneously in their own figures and objects." To him, "Stopping By Woods" was one of Frost's best.<sup>17</sup>

The final two poems I will explore are from Frost's 1936 volume *A Further Range*, "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" and "Design"—both of which were once chosen by Randall Jarrell to represent the "dark" side of Frost.<sup>18</sup> "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" portrays a near universal experience of being at the ocean where most people, as they walk or sit on the shore, look out to sea rather than inland. It is this moment—one in which people on shore look out to sea—that Frost writes about in

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<sup>16</sup> Frost: *A Literary Life Reconsidered*, p. 164, 165.

<sup>17</sup> *Effluences from the Sacred Cave*, p. 58.

<sup>18</sup> Frost: *A Literary Life Reconsidered*, p. 252.



"Neither Out Far Nor in Deep." This poem is different from the rest; the moment Frost expounds on could span an afternoon or entire day. Even though the action in "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep" could take much more time than a mere moment, I have included it because a trip to the beach can be—just like the moment Frost celebrates in "Stopping By Woods"—an excursion away from everyday life.

It is a poem built on four four-line stanzas, each line being from four to six words long. Each stanza has the same, regular, rhyme scheme: a-b-a-b, helping the poem to read quickly and lightly. Here is the first stanza:

The people along the sand  
All turn and look one way.  
They turn their back on the land.  
They look at the sea all day.

The first stanza does nothing more than present the situation, two things side by side—the sea and the land. The rhyme of "sand" and "land" works to this end, as they both refer to the shore. The opposite rhyme, that of "way" and "day," capitalizes on the fact that Frost is pointing out the fact that people only look "one way." This is not restricted to certain times; it happens "all day."

In the second stanza, too, Frost develops the opposition between land and sea.

As long as it takes to pass  
A ship keeps raising its hull;  
The wetter ground like glass  
Reflects a standing gull.

He writes of a ship that "as long as it takes to pass/...keeps raising its hull." The rhyme of "pass" with "glass" brings the reader's eye back to the shore where Frost had likened the wet ground to glass. Because of images like this one, the reader is constantly aware of both the land and the sea.

In the third stanza, Frost moves from the opposition between land and sea to the implications of the tendency to look out to sea.

The land may vary more;



But wherever the truth may be—  
The water comes ashore,  
And the people look out to sea.

The opposition between the water coming ashore and the people looking out to sea remains; Frost is keen to relate to the reader such motion in opposite directions—water coming in and people looking out. In the midst of this—“wherever the truth may be—” people choose to look “out to sea.” Why? You may have your own answer—so may Frost. If he has, he chooses not to disclose it to the reader. Frost never answers such questions in his poems, but only displays the moment to prompt the question.

Frost portrays the land and sea, a ship on the water, a gull standing on the wet sand, and tells his readers that even in the midst of these familiar scenes people continue to look to the sea. He then narrows in on their looking, their rapt contemplation of something so foreign, so hostile.

They cannot look out far.  
They cannot look in deep.  
But when was that ever a bar  
To any watch they keep?

Frost’s rhyme scheme works the same way here; “bar” sends the reader back to “far” in the first line of this stanza, reminding the reader that the distance has no bearing on the people’s looking—nor does unfamiliarity with the sea or fear of its hostility to humans. This poem could be compared with “For Once Then Something” in that Frost writes in both poems about a hypothetical moment. Both looking down a well and out to sea can be seen to symbolize the human tendency to try to see transcendent things, things that may not exist. Jarrell has found in this poem the “recognition of the essential limitations of man...and that recognition is the usual thing we encounter in Frost’s poetry.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Frost: *A Literary Life Reconsidered*, p. 208.





The final poem I will discuss is "Design", a poem that presents the reader with a moment, it is also a poem different from the rest of the twelve in that Frost uses a great deal of imagery in it. The moment it presents is a moment of discovery by the speaker; the elements he discovers in the scene are familiar to him—it is their arrangement that is striking. The significant issue of the moment is the speaker's questioning the relationship between intention and pattern and the meaning implied by such a relationship. "What but design of darkness to appal?—/If design govern in a thing so small." "Design" is like the rest of the nine poems in that, in closing, Frost poses a question of eternal significance and does not go on to answer it.

The poem is a sonnet built on an octet and a sestet. In the octet Frost does no more than show the reader just what the speaker has found. "...a dimpled spider, fat and white,/On a white heal-all, holding up a moth/Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—" There are three things here—the spider, the flower, and the moth—all of which are white. Color is part of Frost's imagery, and in the sestet he will address not just design, but the design "of darkness." Frost sets up an opposition between the purity associated with the color white and this image of predation. The name of the flower, a "white heal-all," seems to denote something nurturing, curing; yet, this "white heal-all" is where one organism of nature kills another. "Assorted characters of death and blight/Mixed ready to begin the morning right..." Frost's rhyme gives the poem a sort of contrived lightness that seems to temper the destruction of the act. The simple, even cheap, irony of "to begin the morning right" goes with the simple irony of white blight, but also plays on the underlying question. "Like the ingredients of a witches' broth—/A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,/And dead wings carried like a paper kite." The last three lines of the octet echo the first three, except that Frost brings in the idea of a witches' broth,



making the ingredients metaphorical rather than actual. It is now “a snow-drop spider” rather than a “a dimpled spider, fat and white. The “white heal-all, holding up a moth” in the second line of the poem is now “a flower like a froth.” The moth, too, is “a white piece of rigid satin cloth” at the beginning of the stanza; at the end of the first stanza, its wings are “dead” and are being “carried like a paper kite.” During the action in the octet, the killing is complete.

While the octet presents the moment, the sestet presents the issue. The sestet is no more than a series of questions.

What had that flower to do with being white,  
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?  
What brought the kindred spider to that height,  
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?

Frost comes back to the color of the flower—what had it to do “with being white?”—the “innocent heal-all” that it is. Why was the spider at such a height? Why did the moth fly off its course only to meet the spider in its trap? Why must one die for the survival of another? “What but design of darkness to appall?—/If design govern in a thing so small.”

Frost implies that all of these ironies must be evidence of the design—that is, the intention of “darkness” to shock us, terrify us, to make us white with fear. (The word *appall* comes from the French *appalir*, meaning to grow pale.) Then, characteristically, Frost retreats—“if design govern in a thing so small.”

In “Design” Frost questions the relationship between intention and pattern without defending or denying that there is some omniscient power—God—overseeing all things. He simply proposes the existence of such a Being by ending the poem with a question. Is there some power of design? If there is, does it govern “in a thing so small?” Here, too, Frost uses the moment to provide the setting from which he then goes on to question the design of the world we live in.



Frost's work is typical of most nineteenth and twentieth century poets because he does not write within a clearly defined context—the moment *is* the context. The work of Matthew Arnold is an example of the tradition Frost is an heir to. In his familiar "Dover Beach" Arnold suggests that there is no truth in the world apart from people being true to one another.

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain...

Arnold set forth for the reader what he saw, what he believed—a world void of meaning outside all that is found in human relationships. Frost probably believed in the world Arnold writes about and, therefore, did not seek to present some over-arching truth apart from the moment.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, on the other hand, is a nineteenth century poet who did not fit the literary tradition of his time or even that of the twentieth century. He lived during the last half of the nineteenth century, but his work was not published until 1918—by this date, he is often named a modern poet. Hopkins saw the world, man's domain, but his gaze did not rest on man. Hopkins saw God in the world. "And for all this (man's smudge and smell), nature is never spent;/There lives the dearest freshness deep down things..." Why? "Because the Holy Ghost over the bent/World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."<sup>20</sup> Hopkins looked objectively at the world, "the bent world," and saw the Spirit of God hovering near "with warm breast and with ah! bright wings." Hopkins never refrained from teaching his readers, enlightening them to the presence of God.

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<sup>20</sup> from Hopkins' "God's Grandeur"



Hopkins placed the nature of this world into a context, the tradition and structure of Christianity, instead of seeing it as merely a continuum of moments.

Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows flaunt forth, then chevy on an air-  
built thoroughfare...  
Delightfully the bright wind boisterous ropes, wrestles, beats earth bare  
Of yestertempest's creases...  
Man, how fast his firedint, his mark on mind, is gone!  
...Enough! the Resurrection,  
A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping, joyless days, dejection.<sup>21</sup>

Hopkins describes nature, moving from the clouds to the wind, and then to man, "how fast his firedint." Hopkins presents nature and man as they are, ephemeral, but he then goes on to something more, something much greater—"the Resurrection." Hopkins writes that "across (his) foundering deck shone/A beacon, an eternal beam..."—Jesus Christ. He says, "I am at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and/This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,/Is immortal diamond." Hopkins says that he is "immortal diamond" because and only because Christ was once a man and is now in him. Hopkins insists on nature as an "Heraclitean Fire" because he is always aware of a context not subject to this fire (or some such thing). Poets like Arnold and Frost must stay with the fire because they are not aware of any context apart from it. This being so, they evidently can benefit from what Keats calls "negative capability."

Frost became a master of what John Keats named "negative capability" in a letter to George and Tom Keats written on 22 December 1818—"...that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."<sup>22</sup> Published in 1820, Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" illustrates

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<sup>21</sup> from Hopkins' "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection"

<sup>22</sup> William Heath, Major British Poets of the Romantic Period, (NY: The Macmillan Company, 1973) p. 1105.





this idea of negative capability. The poem takes place outside where the speaker contemplates the song of a nightingale.

'Tis not through envy of the happy lot,  
But being too happy in thine happiness—  
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,  
In some melodious plot  
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,  
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.<sup>23</sup>

The speaker focuses for a time on the song of the bird with the hope that he might

Fade far away , dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan...

There is a bit of Frost here, as the speaker seeks to lose himself in the bird's song, to call the reader to hear the bird first and foremost. The idea of negative capability becomes an issue in the eighth and final stanza of the poem. The song of the bird fades, and the speaker can no longer pinpoint it, identify it. "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?/Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?" This is what Keats described when he wrote of the capability "of being in uncertainties...without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

In each of the moments he creates, Frost implies that the moment shows us the truth—truth is found in looking clearly at what is before one right now. It is the moment of seeing some whiteness in "For Once, Then, Something." It is the moment of realizing that the boy in "Out, Out—" has died in shock. Frost shares what he has seen and names each of those moments "truth", but seeing is relentlessly individual. By this standard, there is no truth apart from what one sees; Frost does not imply a context like that which Hopkins does not merely imply, but declares.

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<sup>23</sup> from Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale"



But there *is* a context. The context of Frost's work lies in the fact that things ought to make sense (As Frost notes in "The Wood-Pile," how queer it is to waste a cord of wood.), that there is or might be *design*, that there is Truth in the depths. On the other hand, Frost's negation of these things is also a context; it seems meaningful to deny the implication, to insist that there is no truth apart from what one sees.

Finally, Frost addresses the issue of moments versus a continuum. I am here now, in the woods on a snowy evening with horse in harness, but I shall die someday. It is inevitable that we will move from this moment to that one. How can life be "a dimished thing"? How can it be anything different from what it is right now? In "Evening in a Sugar Orchard," sparks leave the chimney of a sugarhouse and glow alongside the stars in the sky. Frost does not distinguish between the sparks and the stars, as I have done. He sees the sparks *as* the stars, which is, in one sense, inaccurate. The sparks are *not* the stars; they are miniscule and they flicker in fractions of a second, while stars are enormous and they shine constantly. In another sense, one that characterizes nineteenth and twentieth century poets, it is inevitable for a "modern" poet to rid all distinction between the two—to focus on the moment in which the sparks *seem* like stars, without taking into account what is actually true.



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